

“The Table of Grace”
November 20, 2011
Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Well, this is the final word Jesus has for teaching his disciples. For chapter after chapter we’ve read in Matthew’s Gospel one story after another, parable upon parable. And this is the last one. It’s the last parable Jesus tells. After this he brings parable to life and with his own life demonstrates the true, deep nature of God’s love. But with this story Jesus issues if not a threat, then at least a warning. When it’s all said and done, he tells us, the path into the kingdom is through the least, the last, and the lost.

Yesterday I was at a Presbytery meeting and we had a guest speaker, a minister from Pittsburgh named Jim Walker. Jim led an educational piece that was exhausting and left me feeling completely inadequate, but made a really powerful point about the future of the church in our culture. He said because our churches were established in an industrial environment, our tendency is to do ministry “to” and “for” others. But the model we find in the gospels is Jesus doing ministry “with” others. When we do ministry to and for others, we tell them what they need and then create programs to satisfy their needs. When we do ministry with others, we listen to them and invite them to participate in creating a ministry together.

He said a lot of other things, but that point reminded me of a word that I think is an anthropological or sociological term, actually: commensality. Commensality means, literally, “together at table.” A few years ago I read a book by John Dominic Crossan on Jesus and he said that Jesus practiced “open commensality.” In the time and culture where Jesus ministered, who you ate with mattered. And not just a little; it really mattered. So a person of any standing in his community would never eat with someone considered to be lower class or unclean. But over and over a main complaint against Jesus is what... He eats with sinners and tax collectors. He eats with anyone and everyone who’s willing. When he sends his disciples out to the villages in the countryside, what does he tell them? He tells them to go to the homes of anyone who will take them in and eat whatever they’re served. That’s a risky thing to do in a culture so hung up on the kind of company you keep.

And of course, what it means is anyone might wind up sitting at the table with them. And it probably wouldn’t be folks who care much about their reputations. When you’re hungry, you’ll eat with anyone willing to give you food. And so Jesus paints this picture of all the nations standing before the Son of Man and being sorted like sheep and goats. All the nations, everyone, no exceptions, are subject to judgment. And the one thing that stands between them: when I was hungry, you fed me; when I was thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was naked, you clothed me; when I was sick or in prison, you visited me. And they have no idea.

All the distinctions that we use to separate ourselves from one another fall away. They are all dissolved in Christ. This is a Celtic parable from this little collection called “The Three Priests:” [READ FROM CELTIC PARABLES]

Lately we've been talking a lot around here about what's important. A few weeks ago you took a survey asking what keeps you attached here and what are some beliefs that are central to us. The results of those are being compiled, but in the conversations I've been in I'm hearing about a need to be more welcoming, to be a place of hospitality. It seems to me there is a hunger here for a wider inclusion, for a desire to open the table of God's grace. Making more room at the table is a practice I think is close to Jesus' heart. It's what he seems to be inviting his followers and his opponents to do over and over.

Today as we dedicate our pledge cards, I want you to think about them not as your donation, but as your commitment to becoming a community where others can come to find a place at the table of God's grace. I suspect a lot of us here were looking for that when we came. A lot of us here have felt on the outside, like we just didn't belong at school or at work or even in our families. So we know how important it is to have a place at the table.

And we know it's at the table where we meet Jesus. He's the one we feed; whose thirst we quench; the one we clothe and visit. He is with us inviting us into his kingdom. All we have to do is turn to him and say, "Yes!"

Amen